Advancing Federal Government Objectives in Urban Regions

A Position Paper prepared by
the Greater Vancouver Regional District
(as approved by GVRD Board, December 14, 2001)

106-06601/

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Introduction: Why Do Urban Regions Matter?

Policies and actions by national governments around the world have demonstrated the importance of urban regions as the necessary focus for fulfilling national agendas. Advantage in the global economy is increasingly being linked to the recognition of the connectivity of global and local issues. The Canadian federal government is turning its attention to making the link between advancing federal objectives and the social, economic and environmental well-being of urban regions. Collaboration among local, provincial, and national governments is essential in building successful, competitive and sustainable urban regions.

In the last year, this increased federal interest in urban issues has manifested itself in a number of ways. The Prime Minister announced the formation of a Prime Minister's Caucus Task Force on Urban Issues. The task force will deliver an interim report by April 2002. The recent international negotiations on the Kyoto Protocol demonstrate the world's commitment to addressing climate change. Canada has committed to ratify the Protocol in 2002. This initiative will play a key factor is shaping urban energy, transportation and urban development policies.

As part of the preparation for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in September 2002 in Johannesburg, the federal government is promoting the theme 'Sustainable Communities' and exploring opportunities to enhance its contribution to community sustainability. In cooperation with the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), consultations with experts, provincial and local officials will occur in February 2002, hosted by the City of North Vancouver and the GVRD. The goal is to discuss, review, and prepare Canada's approach to WSSD and to seek views on what the federal government's role should be in promoting community sustainability.

Transport Canada launched the "Showcase" program in 2001 to give funding to a number of projects across Canada that promote sustainable transportation and help reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Also in 2001, the report on the panel reviewing the *Canada Transportation Act* was submitted to the federal government. Their report, *Vision and Balance*, includes a chapter on the national interest in urban transportation and recommendations for improving the funding and organization of urban transit.

The federal government, through the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, is providing "green municipal funds" for studies and investment in sustainable solutions in the delivery of municipal services. The tri-partite Infrastructure Program was renewed in 2000 and includes "green infrastructure" projects as well as projects related to affordable housing and culture. Earlier this year, the CMHC announced a four-year program for affordable housing, for new construction and conversion, and for which local governments would be eligible for grants.

The National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy has initiated a project on "Economic and Social Advantages of Urban Environmental Investment" and one of their goals is to document the actual linkages between more livable and sustainable urban-centred clusters and international competitiveness.

The Senate Committee on Aboriginal peoples is traveling across Canada starting in the fall of 2001 to study urban native issues.

The Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) sees the opportunity for the cooperative, strategic involvement of the federal government in the initiatives of provinces and local governments in urban regions which offer high-leverage opportunities for the attainment of common objectives. We further suggest that regional-scale plans and programs can provide an effective framework for identifying such opportunities. For this reason, the paper begins with a description of existing federal responsibilities in Greater Vancouver. It then outlines a set of principles that should underlie a more effective federal role that would apply in all urban regions. The paper concludes with a description of existing and evolving regional plans and initiatives and provides suggestions for a federal agenda that is specific to the needs of Greater Vancouver.

1 Federal Responsibilities in the Vancouver Region and Public Policy Challenges

1.1 Federal responsibilities

The federal government has a significant presence in Greater Vancouver. The federal port and airport facilities are key components of the region's function as a gateway for the movement of passengers and goods between Canada and the rest of the world. Its border crossings within the region are among the busiest in Canada. The Fraser River, the most important salmon-bearing river on the continent, runs through the region, which is also a key component of the Pacific flyway for migratory birds, both of which are federal responsibilities. These specific areas of involvement are in addition to the economic, social and environmental programs that are to be found in this as well as other urban regions.

Since the 1980s the federal government has withdrawn from most urban programs that provided direct support for urban infrastructure, such as housing and transportation. The transportation role has been largely regulatory in matters such as aviation, marine rail, inter-provincial trucking, and dangerous goods movement. On the revenue side, the federal government establishes the rate and collects fuel taxes, and sets taxation policy for different transportation modes. Fisheries management and the regulation of motor vehicle fuels and emissions are federal responsibilities. Environment Canada, with support from the Province and the GVRD, is continuing an extensive scientific research program on the causes of air pollution in the Lower Mainland.

Regional offices are charged with delivering a number of federal programs at the provincial and local level, such as Environment Canada, Transport Canada, Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Industry Canada, Human Resource Development Canada, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Health Canada, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and the Office of Western Economic Diversification Canada. All of these departments have been showing an increased interest in the metropolitan region in recent years.

In recognition of the severity of homelessness problems, the federal government recently provided some assistance to urban regions across Canada. The Vancouver Agreement is a good example of a tri-partite approach to local issues and was applied to Downtown Eastside substance abuse, poverty, and homelessness problems. The CMHC has recently announced

some new housing assistance programs, although these alone are not sufficient to solve affordability problems.

1.2 Public policy challenge

The federal government is not structured in a manner that is readily able to address urban issues. Ministries will need to develop the expertise and priority setting processes necessary to create an integrated urban policy. A new integrated policy environment will require new or re-created implementation measures, such as financial incentives to promote environmental and economic sustainability, and sustainable social service delivery systems.

A commitment to dialogue and on-going consultation will be an important part of working together to achieve common objectives. There are existing avenues, such as the periodic joint meetings of Regional Directors Generals of federal departments that could be expanded to encourage dialogue with local and provincial government. The Department of Immigration's Metropolis Project, which seeks to build links between policy makers and academic institutions is another example of ways to increase dialogue, discussion, and consultation on issues and solutions.

In a recent speech, Maurice Strong observed that the "availability of finances is one of the principal constraints on effective management and control of urban growth everywhere and one of the greatest sources of tension and conflict." (May 26, 2001 FCM). Local governments rely on the property tax base for most of their funding. While this fiscal structure may have been appropriate when municipal activities were limited to serving property, it is no longer adequate given the wide and growing responsibilities of local government in metropolitan areas. In fact, the over-reliance on property tax may have contributed to poor land use planning decisions through the competition among municipalities for tax assessment. While it may seem fiscally prudent in the short run, the pursuit of property tax revenue creates such problems as highly dispersed job locations, and impairs efforts to provide cost-effective transportation and other urban services.

Increasingly, national revenues are coming from the residents of major metropolitan areas, through their income tax, goods and services taxes, and fuel taxes. For example, the residents of Greater Vancouver contribute over $300 million annually to the federal government through vehicle fuel taxes. Very little of this revenue is returned to the region to support the region's transportation infrastructure. Nation-wide, the net cumulative surplus in the last five years to the federal government from transportation revenues is estimated to be more than $10 billion. The individual taxpayer who contributes both municipal property taxes and federal taxes finds it difficult to respond positively to appeals to make up shortfalls in the former when it is apparent there are surpluses in the latter. Additionally, when federal funds are returned to the region, there is a tendency to look for major capital projects, which are high profile, limited time commitments, rather than programs and projects identified in local and regional plans, which may be fundamental to sustainability objectives. Sustainable regions need sustainable plans that must include sustainable funding.

To date federal policy has favoured financing programs along the lines of the Infrastructure Canada grants, with a fixed time period and done in partnership with provincial and municipal governments rather than ongoing dedicated funding mechanisms such as ear-marking fuel

taxes for regional transportation purposes. Given that the formulation of urban policy requires a "whole of government" re-think, it is appropriate that this include a re-evaluation of fiscal tools in ways that address urban problems effectively.

2 Principles for Building the Federal Role

2.1 Work towards the attainment of federal objectives through investment in the nation's urban regions

Canada's economic strategy is based on the premise that the purpose of economic growth is to enhance the well-being of all Canadians. The federal government now recognizes that Canada's urban regions are key to delivering the nation's objectives, in terms of building social capital, human capital, promoting competitiveness, innovation, and advancing environmental objectives. In its Throne Speech, the current federal government recognized local government as an important and legitimate partner in the creation and delivery of national programs.

2.2 Respect jurisdictional responsibilities

Each level of government has an important role to play in the formulation and implementation of urban policy. For maximum cooperation, effectiveness and efficiency, respect for jurisdiction is essential. Building urban policy together requires a foundation of mutual respect. The principle of subsidiarity should be used to guide jurisdictional responsibility and allocation of fiscal resources - every issue should be managed at the level closest to the people affected by it and at which it can be managed most effectively. At the same time, recognition should be given to all levels of government contributing to the service being provided.

2.3 Recognize the importance of 'Made in the region' approaches

The urban regions of Canada are distinct. Practical solutions will require recognition of the challenges and opportunities of each region, including their diverse cultural and economic qualities, and distinct eco-systems.

2.4 Tri-partite Cooperation is essential to achieving common objectives

The importance of tri-partite cooperation in urban affairs was recently articulated by Stephane Dion, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs (May 26, 2001 FCM):

When federal actions influence the quality of life of our cities and towns, their competitiveness, their social and demographic character, it would be a real anomaly not to have direct and intense relations between federal and municipal leaders. The absence of such relations would be inconceivable in any federation in the world. Not only can federal-municipal interaction be established while fully respecting the provinces, it can be done with their participation, so that that the three orders of government establish a maximum synergy among themselves.

2.5 An integrated approach to fiscal, social, economic, and environmental policy is needed to deliver a cohesive urban policy

Decision-making should reflect the interdependence of environmental, social and economic and transportation planning. To cite an example, the attempt, by a national task force to have an income tax-exemption introduced for Employer Provided Transit Benefits did not succeed, in part because there was no federal urban policy to put this initiative in context.

Federal taxation policies often provide unintended disincentives to sustainable actions in this way.

3 Proposals for the Future Federal Role in Urban regions

3.1 Support planning strategies at the regional scale

Efficient metropolitan planning should encompass entire urbanized regions. Federal involvement should encourage metropolitan regions to prepare and keep current regional plans. For example, funding programs could be contingent on regions having:

- up-to-date comprehensive land use/ transportation regional plans;
- a comprehensive strategy for achieving Kyoto Protocol targets, and federal/bi-national clean air targets;
- strategies to advance social and human capital;
- strategies to protect the environment and promote biodiversity.

Each of Canada's urban regions has distinct competitive advantages as well as social and cultural differences. Recognizing these opportunities will be key to successful "made in the region" approaches.

3.2 Support initiatives that advance federal economic objectives

Road/rails to mines and forests and energy resources were once the focus of federal programs in pursuit of economic growth. However, an international mosaic of urban regions has now emerged as the economic engines of the global economy. Achieving an efficient and equitable urban policy requires a collaborative approach across all three levels of government to achieve the social and physical infrastructure needed in urban regions to incubate and sustain economic opportunity in the new economy. Improving opportunities for collaboration and on-going consultation among all three levels of government is needed.

3.3 Advance the development of human and social capital

Community well-being and advancement of the Canadian model of an inclusive society have been articulated as important national objectives. The HRDC, for example, has been focusing on the need to promote human capital (a skilled labour force) and social capital (the building of community and cultural ties). Studies have demonstrated the links between increased spending in affordable housing programs and reduced costs in health, social service and criminal justice programs. The retreat of the federal government from direct involvement in housing makes these objectives difficult to achieve. Federal programs should go beyond homelessness and tackle the problems of the poorly-housed. The formulation of a national housing strategy, as proposed by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, is required to

provide federal leadership and funding for the social and economic, as well as shelter functions of good housing.

There is a need for continued federal support for community-level, culturally-sensitive programs that can be most efficiently accomplished through coordinated partnerships between sponsoring and funding agencies. Planned increases in the number of immigrants coming to Canada, and particularly to urban regions, means more demand for already strained resources in language and skills training as well as housing, social and cultural programs.

3.4 Pursue harmonization of environmental management and drinking water quality responsibilities

The federal government has important regulatory responsibilities in environmental management and public health, particularly the Fisheries Act, the Canada Drinking Water Quality Guidelines, and the Canadian Environmental Protection Act. These overlap with provincial authority, leading to confusion and conflicting legal liabilities. Urban regions have the capability to prepare integrated environmental management plans that start with the need to manage environmental and public health risk in the context of actual conditions and competing environmental and public health priorities rather than rigid standards. When these approaches are supported by federal agencies, the result can be the most cost-effective environmental protection.

Another key issue for local government is assurance from the federal government that international agreements, such as NAFTA, do not undermine the interests of local government in the provision of infrastructure and environmental management.

3.5 Support sustainable urban transportation

Transport Canada's recent interest in urban transportation is welcome. A starting point for a federal initiative in this area would be endorsement of the Transportation Association of Canada's *New Vision for Urban Transportation in Canada*, which has been endorsed by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, the Greater Vancouver Regional District, many of its members and many other local governments across the country. This vision statement recognizes the need to address the complex array of factors that impede the achievement of more sustainable transportation in Canadian cities, including land use patterns, fragmented governmental jurisdiction and inappropriate financial arrangements.

The Canada Transport Act Review report (July 2001) noted that 'transit has been fighting a losing battle with population dispersal and motorization for a long time.' Solving this problem will require sound local and regional land use planning actions in collaboration with provincial and federal transportation funding strategies. Land use decisions made by federal agencies should support local and regional land use and transportation plans in the siting of offices and facilities.

Economic, social, and environmental objectives for urban development must shape urban transportation policies, not the reverse. Urban transport should be priced in ways that encourage the most efficient use of roads and public transport.

Promoting better environmental outcomes associated with urban travel will make an important contribution in helping Canada meet its Kyoto Protocol and clean air commitments. It also provides a cost-effective way to improve public health.

These factors are the rationale behind the position paper developed by the GVRD and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and approved by many of the major urban local governments across Canada, which contains the following proposal:

1. *That there be ongoing federal funding equivalent to 3 cents per litre nationwide, from existing or new revenue sources, with a preference for using the existing sources;*
2. *That the federal funding be matched by provinces, from existing or new revenue sources, with a preference for using the existing sources;*
3. *That the funding be available in urban regions for any expenditure to prepare and implement a regional plan for sustainable urban transportation, in rough proportion to fuel tax generated in each region; and*
4. *That equivalent funding be made available in non-urban areas on a basis to be worked out between three levels of government.*

A response to this proposal should be an early feature of enhanced federal involvement in urban regions.

3.6 Invest in innovations in urban infrastructure delivery

Energy efficiency and diversity in sources of energy, especially renewable energy, will increase robustness and competitiveness of urban regions. Innovative water supply / recycling technologies, building-based infrastructure that recycles / reduces needs for water and energy and produces less liquid and solid waste can all lead to efficiencies, conservation, and protection of the environment in the long run. The federal government green municipal funds program has made a start at encouraging innovation as has the Smart Communities program introduced by Industry Canada to encourage innovation in information technology and telecommunications.

3.7 Support the voluntary sector

In the federal paper titled *The Canadian Way in the 21st Century*, the importance of community is acknowledged. "Strong communities and good government require engages citizens, citizens who take responsibility not only for themselves but for one another." The voluntary sector continues to play an important role in the advancement of community, athletic and cultural programs, and the arts. Many federal government departments support these initiatives through their grant programs. One of the strengths of local government is its experience and expertise in working with community groups and citizens. Consultation and collaboration with local government in the design of federal grant programs could help improve service delivery and effectiveness.

The voluntary sector, through non-profit groups and neighbourhood associations, is increasingly turning its attention to environmental problems as well as urban development, transportation and housing problems. These efforts warrant support from all levels of government.

3.8 Support objective-based funding programs

Funding programs which are linked to specific solutions can be overly prescriptive and restrictive and can lead to inefficient or inappropriate use of resources. Funding which is linked to outcomes (e.g. reduced GHG emissions) with the implementing agencies, such as local government authorities, responsible for determining the most appropriate means of achieving them will lead to more effective results.

3.9 Support Canadian technology and expertise

All three levels of government should work together to promote the development and use of Canadian national and local technology expertise.

4 A Federal Agenda for Greater Vancouver

4.1 Current and evolving plans and initiatives for the Greater Vancouver Region

The Greater Vancouver Region has a population of 2,050,000 and now makes up 49.5 per cent of the entire population of the province. The region has 1.1 million jobs and its labour force makes up 53 per cent of the provincial labour force.

During the 1990s, an average of 40,000 additional people made Greater Vancouver their home each year. From 1991 to 2000, the Vancouver region grew at a faster rate than all other Canadian metropolitan regions with a 28 per cent increase in population. Immigration continues to account for a significant proportion of regional growth. International immigration accounted for 83 per cent of Greater Vancouver region's population growth between 1991 and 1996.

The region has a culturally diverse population with more than 30 per cent of the population having English as their second language. The population of the region is forecast to grow by more than 800,000 in the next 20 years. Immigration will continue to make up a substantial component of growth.

Current Plans

The effects of unmanaged, low density growth were a significant public concern in the late 1980s. To address this concern, the Greater Vancouver Regional District and its member municipalities adopted an overall vision titled 'Creating Our Future' in 1990. Creating Our Future provided a vision and strategic framework for future growth management, infrastructure, environmental and public amenity plans which were to follow.

In 1993 medium and long range transportation plans were produced in a report titled *Transport 2021* and the main elements of this plan were integrated into the regional growth management plan, the *Livable Region Strategic Plan*. The GVRD Board adopted the *Livable Region Strategic Plan* in 1996 under the provincial Growth Strategies Act, with the formal support of all member municipalities. Since then, all the municipalities have prepared regional context statements, as part of their local plans, to describe how their local plans are consistent with the Livable Region Strategic Plan/Transport 2021 or will be made consistent over time.

The key elements of the regional growth strategy are to focus growth in a compact region, structured into 'complete communities', to increase transportation choice and create a 'green zone'. The complete communities objective is aimed at encouraging the development of communities in ways that enhance social and human capital, and promote the creation of attractive and efficient urban communities. The green zone not only protects areas from urbanization that are better used for agriculture, forestry, water supply, recreation or habitat, but also provides the urban growth boundary.

Other plans that were put in place include: the Air Quality Management Plan (1994) which brought together a series of strategies to improve air quality in the region; the Solid Waste Management Plan (1995) which set in motion a series of actions to reduce per capita disposal of municipal solid waste by 50 per cent; and the Drinking Water Treatment Program (1994) which provided a 30 year plan for progressively improving the quality of the region's drinking water supply.

In a more recent initiative, after extensive engineering and scientific investigations and public consultation, the GVRD and its member municipalities have completed a risk management based Liquid Waste Management Plan as a framework for local government's stewardship responsibilities in respect to the region's waterways. Final provincial approval for this plan is anticipated shortly.

A five-year Strategic Transportation Plan outlining transit and road improvements in the region was developed by the Greater Vancouver Transportation Authority and ratified by the GVRD in 2000. Implementation of this plan however, is dependent on devising an appropriate and acceptable financial strategy, which is in part dependent on decisions made at the provincial and federal levels of government.

Evolving Plans and Initiatives

The Sustainable Region Initiative is the working title given to the major new initiative recently undertaken by the GVRD. Analogous to the *Creating Our Future* endeavour of 1990, the Sustainable Region Initiative will seek to provide a new framework and vision for the region based on a concept of sustainability that encompasses economic and social, as well as environmental dimensions. Changes have been made to the administrative structure of the GVRD to fully integrate the utilities and utility planning with broader regional planning. The Sustainable Region Initiative is therefore expected to bring forward the foundation for a more fully integrated set of plans for the region.

The initial step in this undertaking is contained in the GVRD Board resolution taken at its July 2001 meeting, to commence the review of the Livable Region Strategic Plan and the Air Quality Management Plan within the context of social, economic and environmental sustainability as a fundamental objective. It asked that a community engagement program be part of the review and that events and activities be conducted in partnership with member municipalities, the Greater Vancouver Transportation Authority and other groups.

There have been other recent initiatives that will likely now be encompassed by this new comprehensive approach, including initiatives in affordable housing, parks, aboriginal affairs, economic development and culture:

- In affordable housing the GVRD has taken on the responsibility to manage the process for allocation of federal money for homelessness and has become the "secretariat' for a working group made up of member municipalities. These working groups have also taken on the broader mandate of expanding housing choices and promoting affordable housing alternatives;

- In parks, the GVRD has initiated Greenway and stewardship programs to enhance both the recreational and ecological values of the regional park system. The ramifications of adopting a sustainability focus are now under active consideration;

- In aboriginal affairs the Lower Mainland Treaty Advisory Committee recently completed an issues paper on the linkages between urban off-reserve Aboriginal peoples, their home linkages and neighbouring local governments;

- In economic development, the GVRD helped launch the Greater Vancouver Economic Partnership, a collaboration of private and public enterprises to address economic development issues in the Greater Vancouver area;

- In cultural development, the Greater Vancouver's municipalities worked together to initiate developmental work on a regional cultural plan and found that federal per capita spending on culture in British Columbia lags far behind the other provinces. They have also identified significant needs and opportunities to partner on cultural development, such as a cultural information network, and cultural tourism.

4.2 Opportunities for federal initiatives in Greater Vancouver

This section outlines a more specific agenda of opportunities for the federal government to advance its objectives through cooperation with initiatives in Greater Vancouver. It translates the elements of the generally applicable principles and program elements into a regionally specific set of initiatives.

1) Support the Sustainable Region Initiative

The GVRD Board has launched its Sustainable Region Initiative by way of a resolution to review the Livable Region Strategic Plan and the Air Quality Management Plan within the context of social, economic and environmental sustainability as a fundamental objective. This review will offer many opportunities for federal involvement. For example, the review can provide the opportunity to test the establishment of regional environmental initiatives to support the Kyoto Protocol, embark on a joint community engagement program, and support implementation of the Liquid Waste Management Plan. The Vancouver region has a number of prominent academics, voluntary organizations and private businesses showing leadership and innovation in sustainability. The Sustainable Region Initiative will help forge the links

between government at all levels, the academic sector, the civil sector, and the private sector in advancing sustainability in the region.

2) Build on the region's competitive advantages

In a globally competitive world, metropolitan regions are searching for ways to achieve economic prosperity, and develop in ways that enhances community well-being and protects the environment at the same time. For sectors such as the knowledge economy and tourism, high quality natural environments and attractive communities are in themselves economic advantages. It will be important to work with provincial and federal governments to maintain the existing economic base and look for new economic opportunities in the context of advancing sustainability objectives. For example, major economic generators such as the ports and airports will need to develop in ways that promote efficiency, respect regional land use goals, and do not detract from the qualities of host communities.

3) *Support implementation of regional transportation plans*

Taken together, the long-range and strategic transportation plans adopted by the Greater Vancouver Regional District and the Greater Vancouver Transportation Authority, provide a mutually supportive framework for improvements to the region's urban transportation, goods movement, trans-border and related transportation systems. With attention focusing on sustainable solutions to the transportation challenges of the 2010 Winter Olympic bid, federal support of this framework will be essential. Proposals for partnerships with Environment Canada and Transport Canada are in active development.

The Greater Vancouver Gateway Council, including the port, airport and many other agencies, has put together a proposal for priority transportation improvements. Many, but not all, of these projects are included in existing regional plans.

4) Support social capital initiatives

The federal presence in Greater Vancouver could reflect and support federal involvement in a wide range of initiatives to continue to build social capital. These include assisted housing programs, integrated support for urban aboriginal people, support programs to assist New Canadians, helping address the leaky condominium problem, implementation of the regional homelessness strategy, substance abuse remediation programs, and cultural and educational development programs.

5) Support human capital initiatives

Employment and training programs, including mid-career re-training programs, will continue to be vital to increase the region's global competitiveness, avoid shortages of skilled workers, support the economy and to contribute to individual and community well-being. Federal assistance in supporting research programs, encouraging innovation in industry, and building links between post-secondary training and industry labour requirements are priorities.

5 Conclusion

The story of Canada's success as a society in the 21st Century will be at least in part a story of successful, sustainable cities. The federal government must be part of that success, not only

because of the importance of successful cities to Canada but also because of the importance of cities to the discharge of the federal government's responsibilities. The proposals in this paper outline an approach for federal involvement that is consistent with the needs of the cities and realities of Canada's jurisdictional framework. The proposals offer a chance to achieve not only better cities, but better provinces, a better Canada and a better world.